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Reorganise, but how?

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One of the first targets of President Carter's government reorganisers is the American intelligence community. It is a cleverly selected target, if only because of the existence of a broad, bipartisan consensus that new structures and controls are necessary to prevent a repetition of the abuses and excesses which have caused so much embarrassment. The theory is that it should be relatively easy to score a presidential success with a part of the bureaucracy that is temporarily unpopular—its institutional defences are down and its outside defenders in retreat—and that an early success should bode well for later efforts. But the theory has already run into trouble, because there is nothing approaching a consensus over what should be done.

For a country that did little about intelligence during most of its history (an apparatus was generally built up in wartime and then dismantled with the return of peace), the United States more than caught up after the second world war. Not only did the civilian Central Intelligence Agency, formed out of the wartime Office of Strategic Services, blossom into a sort of government-within-the-government, but the military also developed its own network to complement, and rival, the CIA. These include the Defence Intelligence Agency, which receives and acts upon material gathered by the intelligence branches of the army, navy and air force; the National Security Agency (whose responsibility is communications intelligence); and the even more secret National Reconnaissance Organisation. Never far from the action is the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the state department.

It is no secret that many, if not all, of these agencies and sub-bureaucracies overlap, often duplicating both the gathering of data and its analysis. Some have built up rival computer systems which cannot even communicate with each other. The result, many experts suggest, is that the material going to the president and others who must make decisions is sometimes of an alarmingly low quality and often confusing and contradictory.

One solution, tentatively favoured by Mr Carter's reorganisation team, is to concentrate more authority in the director of the CIA. Theoretically the person in that job, whose formal title is director of Central Intelligence, already has supervisory jurisdiction over all of the intelligence agencies (with the notable exception of the Federal Bureau of Investigation), and Mr Gerald Ford tried to strengthen that jurisdiction. But the military components of the intelligence community, especially the National Security Agency, have resisted supervision from the civilian sector. These military agencies have their own strong supporters on Capitol Hill, who are ever ready to spread the gospel as interpreted by the Pentagon.

Several members of the senate intelligence committee have already expressed grave reservations about concentrating too much authority in the hands of the director of the CIA, especially when the director, Mr Stansfield Turner, is a close friend of the president. Mr Turner is already known to be one of President Carter's most trusted advisers. The two men were classmates at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, and although they had little contact for years, they are said to have struck up a warm relationship based on a shared background and understanding. This has stirred inevitable jealousies. Mr Turner has been accused of insufficient respect for the veterans and the traditions of the intelligence community, and of attempting to grab power from his own former colleagues in the military. He has held on to his commission as an admiral while running the CIA, which upsets those who believe that America's intelligence services should be directed by a civilian.

Turner wants to control the lot

Another argument against centralisation of authority is that it can become politically dangerous to have a single man responsible for the estimates of foreign strength that go to the White House. A diversity of opinion is healthy, some senators argue, and one must always be alert to the risk that a presidential friend will tailor those estimates to what the president wants to hear, as was sometimes done for Lyndon Johnson during the Vietnam war.

The debate will doubtless be longer and more complex than Mr Carter hoped. And that makes many intelligence reformers in congress worry. If reorganisation is delayed, other important and necessary changes in American intelligence practices will be lost. For example, statutory limitations on certain forms of wiretapping and other illegal techniques have been delayed, pending the drafting of a specific reorganisation plan. It would not be surprising if some congressional strategists—and perhaps the administra- [illegible] hose reforms hostage to